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HUMANS AND ANGELS AT WORSHIP

Walter D. Ray, *Tasting Heaven on Earth: Worship in Sixth-Century Constantinople* (Grand Rapids MI, Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2012. £18.99. pp. xi + 158. ISBN:978-0-8028-6663-9).

It is easy to forget that Maximus the Confessor was not a priest. A humble monk, he formed one of the throng of worshippers in the Church of Holy Wisdom in Constantinople. His theological interpretation of the eucharistic liturgy that took place there is the earliest extant account of a remarkable living tradition. Although his account is highly mystical, it is written from the perspective of a layman.

Assembling a range of liturgical texts, eyewitness descriptions, images, plans and artefacts, this innovative study volume pursues Maximus's objective of communicating knowledge and understanding of Byzantine worship to a wider audience. Westerners often view this worship as obscure and archaic, and as celebrating static, reified mystery. Ray, however, gives appropriate prominence to its human, dynamic and chaotic dimensions: the entrance procession into the huge church, with the patriarch leading and the congregation following; the people surging like water around the Gospel procession, held back by waist-high marble barriers but straining to touch and kiss the book during its journey to the central ambo; the chanting of the *Cherubic Hymn* and the *Sanctus*, by which the people became assimilated into the ranks of angels; and in Paul the Silentiary's words, 'my sceptred king, seated on his customary throne' who 'lends his ear to the sacred books'. The people received communion in both kinds at portable tables. Even though the church had 520 clergy, administration could take an hour.

One of the reasons this book is significant is that it traces, especially via Maximus, how theology emerges from liturgy, rather than approaching liturgy as a text requiring exegesis. The theologian might seek more here: why, for instance, omit the striking cosmic imagery in chapter 7 of the *Mystagogy* of Christ as the bond of unity within and between all worldly substances? Nevertheless, a tremendous quantity of material is concisely contained within this usefully slim volume, which has the potential to inform students, researchers and church groups from very different traditions. If the theologian is left yearning for more, is he not by this very fact sharing in an experience that is fundamental in the Byzantine liturgy?

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